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Bureau of Community and Environmental Health

Idaho Private Well Owner Brochure

What are the responsibilities of owning a private well?

Your drinking water is delivered to your faucet either through a public water system or from a private well or spring. Both public and private water systems tap into ground water and surface water sources through wells, springs, and intakes from streams or rivers.

In order to protect their consumers, public water suppliers are required by law to test their drinking water regularly and make these tests results available to the public. Unlike public water supplies, these drinking water regulations do not apply to private wells. As a private well owner, it is your responsibility alone to make sure that your water is safe to drink.

Private wells can provide a clean, safe source of drinking water if they are properly located, constructed and maintained. However, natural and man-made contaminants can get into ground water and into your drinking water. At high enough levels, these contaminants can put your family and animals' health at risk.

If you own your own well, you should periodically test your water, make sure your well system is in good working order, and know how to protect your wellhead. By following the advice in this brochure, you can help insure that your well remains a safe source of drinking water for you and your family.

This brochure contains information to help you find answers to questions about drinking water testing, well construction and maintenance, and basic wellhead protection.

What drinking water contaminants should I be concerned about?

If you find a contaminant in your drinking water, it does not always mean that your water is unhealthy to drink. Some contaminants can occur at low levels and not cause health problems. However, the higher the concentration of a contaminant in your water, the greater the chance it may make you sick.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has set drinking water regulations for public water supplies to protect public health. Although these regulations do not apply to private wells, they can be used as guides to help you determine if your water is safe to drink.

For a list of drinking water contaminants, potential health effects, and sources of drinking water contaminants contact the EPA safe drinking water hotline toll-free at 1-800-426-4791, or visit www.epa.gov/safewater/mcl.html#mcls.

What are some contaminants found in Idaho ground water?

Idaho ground water may contain infectious microorganisms (such as harmful bacteria and viruses), nitrates, arsenic, lead, fluoride and organic compounds including oil products, solvents and pesticides. Depending on where your well is located, the depth and condition of your well and possible contaminant sources, you may want to test for one, some or all of these contaminants.

It is important to realize that the shallower the well, the more vulnerable it may be to contaminants from septic systems, agriculture, industry and other human activities. Before testing your drinking water, find out what types of contaminants are of concern in your area for your water system. You can find out about arsenic and nitrates in Idaho ground water and view county ground water reports online at the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ) website, www.deq.state.id.us/water/water1.htm, or call your regional IDEQ office.

If you have water quality questions regarding pesticides, fertilizers, animal waste and other potential agricultural contaminants, contact the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA) Water Quality Program at 208-332-8500 or visit their website at www.idahoag.us/gw/.

When should I test my drinking water?

It is generally a good idea to test well water annually, before purchasing a home, or after installing a new well. You may also want to test if your water is cloudy, has a strange color, odor, taste, or appearance, or if you have recently repaired or had a problem with your home's plumbing, connections, or treatment system.

The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's Bureau of Community and Environmental Health (BCEH) also can provide you with a private well water testing schedule and a guide for troubleshooting well water problems. Contact BCEH at 866-240-3553.

If your water has a funny taste, appearance or smell, you can identify the cause by using the interactive database, "Diagnose Your Drinking Water" at the Water Quality Association's website, www.wqa.org (click on "Diagnose Your Drinking Water" listed under "Consumer's Corner" on the site's front page). This database will help you narrow down causes of drinking water problems by choosing from a list of water symptoms. Once narrowed down, you can also find potential treatments and solutions. To request more information, contact the association by phone, 630-505-0160, or by email, info@wqa.org.

How do I get my drinking water tested?

Once you have decided to test your drinking water, talk to an environmental health specialist at your local health district. These professionals can help you figure out what tests you may want to have done. They can also instruct you on how, when and where to collect your water sample and where to get the appropriate sample bottles.

You should have your water tested at a certified analytical lab. Lab staff can also answer questions about how to collect your water sample. For a list of certified drinking water analyses labs in your area contact your regional IDEQ office. You can also find a list of labs at: www.deq.state.id.us/water/dw/water_analyses_labs.htm.

What should I do if a test result comes back positive?

As mentioned before, the presence of a contaminant is not always a sign of a health hazard. However, if your well water tests positive for a contaminant, discuss your test results with an environmental health specialist at your local health district. These professionals can help you determine if you and your family's health is at risk.

If your drinking water tests positive for a contaminant at levels that may harm your health, fix the problem as soon as possible. You may need to disinfect your well, repair your system, find an alternative drinking water source, or install a water treatment device to remove contaminants. There are many different treatment devices available. Different types remove different contaminants. There is no one device that does it all. It is important to research possible treatment devices carefully to find the best solution for your problem. You must also maintain your

water treatment device once it is installed so that it works properly to keep your drinking water safe.

For additional information about drinking water contaminants, testing, and treatment systems contact the National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) Consumer Affairs Office. Call NSF toll-free at 1-877-867-3435 or visit www.nsfconsumer.org/water/drinking_water.asp. You can also search treatment device product listings online at: www.nsf.org/certified/dwtu/.

The Water Systems Council provides information sheets on drinking water testing, treatment, and maintenance for private wells online at www.wellcarehotline.org/wellcare/infosheets.cfm, or you can speak with a technician by calling the well care hotline toll-free at 1-888-395-1033. To request a free pamphlet about home water treatment units, contact the EPA safe drinking water hotline at 1-800-426-4791.

What do I need to know about well construction and maintenance?

Proper well design, construction and maintenance can reduce the chance that contaminants will get into your well water. To insure proper well construction when installing a well, current Idaho law requires all well drillers to be licensed. Some older wells drilled prior to this ruling may not be constructed to current standards and may need to be updated.

Annual well maintenance is also essential to keep your drinking water safe. Well owners are encouraged to perform an annual water test, periodically check to make sure their well is functioning properly, and repair their system as needed.

For information on well construction, to request a list of licensed well drillers, or to contact a well drilling specialist call the Idaho Department of Water Resources (IDWR) at 208-327-7900 or visit their website at www.idwr.state.id.us/water/well/default.htm.

You can also search for information (including well location, ownership, construction details and underlying strata) about a preexisting well on the IDWR well information search page, www.idwr.state.id.us/water/well/search.htm. Information on older wells may not be available online. However, many older reports are maintained in microfilm files. If you cannot find a well report online, contact your regional IDWR office.

The Idaho Home*A*Syst project provides in-depth information on proper well location, construction, and maintenance and can help you identify homestead activities that may affect your drinking water. For a copy of the Home*A*Syst packet, call the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts at 208-338-5900 or download a packet at the following website: www.idahoag.us/gw/homeasyst.htm.

Additional Resources

You can find additional information about private wells at the following links:

The EPA publication, *Drinking Water from Household Wells*, answers questions about drinking water from household wells, lists activities that may affect your water supply, describes problems to look for, and provides maintenance recommendations; www.epa.gov/safewater/privatewells/pdfs/household_wells.pdf.

Wellowner.org provides consumer information about ground water and private wells at www.wellowner.org.

NSF International, a not-for-profit organization, develops standards, product testing procedures, and certification services for products including water treatment devices. Call 1-877-867-3435 or visit its web site at www.nsfconsumer.org.

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